

DIRECT TO YOU

Let us speak and listen differently

THE VISION OF a non-racist, non-sexist democracy continues to appeal to us. Its attraction emerges from the deep needs and aspirations of most South Africans. It is compelling and provides purpose and meaning. It thus becomes the intent, and defines what is possible. Embracing this ideal assumes a commitment and ongoing work, so that we can become what we want to be.

The South African Constitution demands *and* promises a commitment to achieve personal, social, political and economic transformation. Some senior judges have written about the *aspirational* quality of the Constitution and the need to address the great disparities in society.

This vision of an inclusive society requires our commitment to a national ethos and an active participation in the creation of a new society.

The term 'racism' refers to the assumption that races are inherently superior or inferior, with the concomitant tendency to use power to exclude. It is useful to distinguish between forms of racism. In South African terms, old-fashioned racism exhibits the more overt and explicit expression of superiority, whereas modern racism is covert and subtle. Modern racism is sometimes manifested by doing and speaking *for* others, by ignoring differences and by avoiding meaningful contact with those regarded as different and inferior. The existence of many exclusive groups and the tendency to advocate for the specific interests of certain groups only can be seen as examples of modern racism. In a non-racist society, race will therefore not be used as a criterion to include or exclude.

In a patriarchal society like ours sexism continues to be a political and social reality. The assumption of the superiority of men is pervasive, with the attendant use of power to exclude women from positions of power. Some religions display blatant forms of old-fashioned sexism and have a strong influence on forms of sexist socialisation. Modern sexism, on the other hand, is manifested in



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different ways: more commonly by the avoidance of contact and a disregard for the realities of gender differences. It is not unusual for senior structures in organisations to include only one or two women, and men often appear to be quite comfortable with those levels of exclusion. To create a non-sexist society, gender must not be used as a criterion to include or exclude, and gender differences must be acknowledged and understood.

The concept of inclusiveness is more than representivity. Inclusion also implies an empowered presence in a validating and supportive environment, to encourage honest engagement. Being ever-conscious of who is present is a good start to achieving the ideal of inclusivity.

Much has been written about democracy and its broader implications.

The initial insistence of people like Dr Nelson Mandela on the democratic principle of *one adult, one vote* is significant – to create inclusion and credibility. Creating democratic structures also has implications for how we manage and lead today. This literally requires of us both to speak and listen differently and to make sure all those who are affected have a voice in the decisions that are made.

Transformation lies at the heart of the constitutional promise. Living this principle encompasses many spheres of life and will require transformational leadership and the willingness to be the change we want to see in the world, to paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi.

Another requirement is the willingness to forgive self and others. Not forgiving will be a barrier to change and healing. This will require knowing, remembering and embracing the past, without being vengeful. Forgiveness opens the door to the possibility of reconciliation and transformation. This often requires the willingness to tell and to listen to all the varied stories without judging. In these honest conversations personal change takes place.

We must remind ourselves that exclusiveness was the colonial and apartheid dynamic that wreaked havoc in the lives of most South Africans. Let us not forget our resilience and determination to overcome the unsustainable patterns of the past, and focus on opportunities to create greater equality. ■

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